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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the recent literature concerning black studies on campus. Emphasis is placed on objectives, administrative and curricular considerations, and the qualities of academic leadership required by new circumstances. (MJM)

Remarks

President James M. Hester
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Institute of Afro-American Affairs Conference
at New York University
February 7, 1975

To prepare to speak to you about black studies, I have examined some of the recent literature on the subject. Some observers see a major transition occurring in contemporary black studies on campus.

S. Jay Walker, Chairman of the black studies program at Dartmouth, wrote in the American Scholar in August, 1973, of two phases in contemporary black studies.¹ In phase one, during the middle and late sixties, a dynamic black studies movement swept the United States. Walker wrote that "Perhaps nothing comparable had happened in American education since Edmund Ware and his cohorts swept into the South a century before to plant full-fledged universities--Fisk, Howard, Atlanta--among a people only months removed from slavery." Phase one was a period of positive and long overdue change in higher education, but it was also, Walker thought, a period of excesses. He did not hide his impatience with "jerry-built" black studies programs nor his distaste for black separatism and for the efforts of some white administrators to isolate black studies programs physically and psychically.

According to Walker, the beginnings of a second phase in black studies was evident by 1973. He characterized this as: "The weeding out of many programs and the survival only of the fittest."

¹S. J. Walker, "Black Studies: Phase Two," American Scholar, (August, 1973), pp. 604-615.

He cited as causes of the new phase the new depression in higher education, the resurgence of the opponents of black studies, and the growing skepticism of black students themselves. The black student himself, Walker emphasized, "is beginning to question black studies programs." According to Walker, "The dashiki-clad shucking and jiving, the revolutionary rhetoric, the signs and symbols: all these are deja vu to today's black student." The black student, he wrote, "has no objection to denunciation as such, but he is unwilling to settle any longer for rhetoric alone: he wants intellectual substance and standards that will allow him to go beyond that denunciation into meaningful action."

J. K. Obatala, a California journalist, wrote in the Smithsonian last December that the political winds that spawned contemporary black studies have now abated. In the wake of the storm," he noted, "both intruders (i.e., large numbers of black students) and their hosts (the predominantly white institutions) are having to face up to the problem of what to do about black studies." He found a decline of student enrollment in black studies and a phasing out of some programs, but by no means the end of black studies. He concluded that "the present reversal could mean that for the first time since the 1960's, a healthy balance is being struck."²

Vivian W. Henderson, President of Clark University in Atlanta, described a transition in progress in an article in last fall's

² J. K. Obatala, "Black Studies Stop the Shouting and Go to Work," Smithsonian, December, 1974, p. 48.

Daedalus, "Blacks and Change in Higher Education."³ His concern was with the broad question of "what black involvement in campus radicalism has meant for higher education." Student and black radicalism have obviously declined--that is the change he emphasizes--but what impact have they had on the campus? "Black students on white campuses," he wrote, "usually focused their objectives and demands on the elimination of institutional racism, the recruitment of more black students and black faculty, the need for black studies programs, and separate facilities for living, and cultural and social affairs." "Most of the accomplishments by black students," Henderson wrote, "were short-lived." But he found their contributions to the black studies movement to be more substantial: "Protests by black students put curriculum, instruction, research, and public service regarding blacks at a new level in the academic community . . . Studies about blacks in America and in the world appear to have won a foot in the door as a respectable area for instruction, research, and public service." And further, "while black studies as originally developed have been on the decline, there has evolved a sense of legitimacy about Afro-American studies, particularly where programs are built around the traditional and respected disciplines."

In the late sixties the test of academic leadership, yours and mine alike, was whether we could wrest positive change from crisis conditions. Crisis was conducive to change, but also to mistakes

³Vivian Henderson, "Blacks and Change in Higher Education." Daedalus (Fall, 1974), pp. 72-79.

in judgment. College presidents were often characterized as "crisis managers," whose concern was thought by some to be to contain, if not to thwart change of the university's role in relation to black people, culture, and history. New or prospective black studies leaders and faculty had in many ways the most difficult responsibilities and often risked accusations that they were being co-opted by white administrators.

That time of crisis seems distant now. Tranquility rather than crisis prevails. Black studies are in place, but general retrenchment of higher education, budget deficits, indifference, defeatism, administrative "consolidation," or sheer inertia are among the many possible hazards they have to face.

Now is a good time to reappraise the objectives of the black studies movement, administrative and curricular considerations, and the qualities of academic leadership required by new circumstances.

Most academics would argue that the central purpose of black studies in the university should be scholarly inquiry and teaching concerning black people, black history, and black culture. Others have placed emphasis or priorities elsewhere: for example, on fostering a black ideological consciousness or on developing highly motivated cadres for community action.

My own view is that objective inquiry and teaching are the most powerful instruments for changing and improving society the university possesses. I would support S. Jay Walker of Dartmouth

when he states: "Black studies can no longer afford to attempt to implant ideologies: integration, separation, liberation, nationalism, revolution, pan-Africanism, what have you. They must, rather, give the student access to, experience with, criticism of, all these doctrines, with the assurance that if he has also been given the scholarly capacity to make a wise and independent choice, the program has done its job." The Shockley doctrine, or Time on the Cross, are more effectively countered by intellectual criticism than by street demonstrations. New York University's Institute of Afro-American Affairs recently sponsored an academic presentation on Time on the Cross. Several hundred participants heard a number of well-informed, trenchant critiques of that controversial book. That, it seems to me, is a highly appropriate function of a black studies program in a university setting.

At the same time, it is disingenuous of university educators to assert that scholarly inquiry and teaching are the full measure of the university mission and impact concerning black people. Unintentionally perhaps, Martin Goldman has done this in a recent article for The Social Studies, entitled "The Academic Subversion of Black Studies." He comments on the dangers of ideology and intellectual intimidation in black studies programs. He argues that "universities must be permitted to remain open places where men of all persuasions can gather to examine or study the disciplines and problems of their own choosing."⁴ I am troubled, however, about one of his major conclusions:

⁴Martin S. Goldman, "The Academic Subversion of Black Studies," The Social Studies (January, 1974), p. 33.

"While able to study societal problems and, upon occasion, to interpret them in a meaningful sense, the universities have to wait for the society at large to produce any needed change. To place our institutions of higher learning in the position of major responsibility for America's pressing social questions, paramount among which is the crisis of the races, will inevitably result in destroying the meaning of learning and the reasons behind the necessity for an educated pluralistic society."⁵

If my differences with Goldman are not just semantic, we have a substantial disagreement over the actual role of the university. He implies that scholarly research and teaching are the full measure of university responsibilities concerning the "crisis of the races." However, we must consider the larger impact of the university on society. University admissions, financial aid, affirmative action, and public service policies, as well as black studies programs themselves, are of major significance in changing the place of black people in society. Institutions of higher education have enormous social and political power beyond their primary research and teaching functions, and theories about their social responsibilities should accord with these realities.

The debate over black separatist philosophy that would exclude white students and faculty from black studies has clearly subsided.

⁵ Ibid.

Still, in the minds of some, the idea of "integration" is suspect or discredited because it has seemed to result in the obliteration of black people and culture, or integration solely on white terms. Yet there seems to be no acceptable alternative to the social goals of interracial living, equality, and harmony, and an educational system that reflects these goals. Vivian Henderson is right when he states: "White Folks need black studies as much as, or more than, black folks." Every student who is liberally educated needs substantial knowledge of and, hopefully, empathy for black people in history and society, and providing this knowledge and sensibility remains a major responsibility of black studies programs.

Just as it is timely to reconsider the goals and objectives of black studies, it is also appropriate to re-examine how black studies should be structured within the curriculum and administration of universities and colleges.

I support the view that black studies can be a legitimate focus of academic inquiry in the same way we approach urban or international studies. Methodologies from history, social sciences, or statistics, for example, can be applied to black studies just as they are to urban or international studies. There is a need for interdisciplinary approaches to these important and complex phenomena--black, urban, or international. They cannot be treated adequately by individual disciplines, although the interdisciplinary result must be based on sound disciplinary contributions.

Should black studies be dispersed within the traditional departments? Or should they be constituted as a distinct department, center, institute, or within a "third world college"?

There can be no simple answers to these questions for all higher education. The right answer for any institution will depend upon its location, size, and resources, faculty and student composition, and upon how it defines its general mission.

According to Ernest Spaights, Assistant Chancellor at The University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, a semi-autonomous structure for black studies is imperative. "Someday," he asserts, "black studies will lose its autonomous aspect and will take its place with other majors as a formal discipline. When that happens, the dangers of black pride and black nationalism leading to black racism will no longer be an issue, because, by then, black studies programs will have helped the black community to the point where it can successfully enter American society on a first-class basis. However, until that day arrives, black studies programs must remain semi-autonomous, because traditional universities cannot be trusted with the goal of collective black development."⁶

We have felt the need here at NYU to assure black studies a special and semi-autonomous status in the University. A single catalyzing and consciousness-raising institute has been needed to marshal and focus the considerable though dispersed black studies

⁶ Ernest Spaights, "Black Studies Programs: Issues and Problems," The Urban Review (September, 1971), p. 39.

resources of the entire University. Special status has been needed to articulate and organize our specific concerns for black students. The Institute will be needed for the foreseeable future, although the longer term hope is that the precepts of black studies will pervade the entire University.

This view is under strong pressure here and elsewhere. The economy of higher education is shaky, and foundation and government contract money for black studies is not flowing as it previously did. Central university budgets or the major income generating sectors of the university increasingly bear the administrative costs of black studies institutes.

Under such circumstances, the skeptics of semi-autonomous administrative arrangements for black studies are reasserting themselves. To those who ask whether these arrangements are really necessary, I can only respond that they seem to us to be, at least for the foreseeable future.

Professor Elliott P. Skinner of Columbia University has laid down a challenge for black studies leaders, which has been expressed elsewhere by two other prominent black scholars, John W. Blassingame of Yale and Martin Kilson of Harvard. Skinner states:

"The issue for blacks is how can black studies be plugged into the ordinary budgetary lines of the university and not eliminated at a time of shrinking budgets and the departure of 'soft' money. If black studies is to survive, the task

for black students, black faculty members, and black administrators is to make their enterprise part of the university system. . . . Black studies is faced with the task of making it within the university. Like political science or anthropology, black studies will have to defend itself in terms of the caliber of work it does and the brilliance of professors and students. There is no other choice."⁷

Professor Walker of Dartmouth not only agrees with Skinner but states what this means with respect to black studies leadership. Black studies, he asserts, "must give its fair share to the communal life of the college and demand its fair share from the college." Moreover, black studies "must learn to work the power lines of administrative offices, curriculum committees, and academic senates, and it must make its voice heard on all issues that affect the college as a whole, not only those of its parochial concerns."⁸

I heartily agree, but let me also say that, if black studies leaders have the task of making it in the university, other university administrators and faculty members have a corresponding duty to assure that integration of black studies into the university is not by disintegration. Black studies leaders and programs should not have to sell their "soul" to make it in the university.

⁷ Elliott P. Skinner, "The Impact of African and Afro-American Studies: Agenda for the Future," p. 6, in Ewa U. Eko, Achievement and Promise: Current Impact and Future Prospects of African and Afro-American Studies. 65th Conference of the Association, Greensboro, North Carolina, 1973.